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AUTHOR Baker, R. J.
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ABSTRACT

The lack of knowledge about Canadian English by teachers of English in Canada is noted in this paper, and a rationale for the need to understand the sounds, syntax, word formation, vocabulary, and history of the language is developed. An approach to teaching a course in language that provides a mix of rigorous linguistic analysis and a more general approach is described. According to the overview of the course, students are required to read about the history of language outside of class; learn phonetic transcription and grammatical analysis in class; focus attention on a particular piece of language such as a Middle English text, a set of Bibles or dictionaries chosen from different periods, or a tape of a disc jockey; and then analyze the language as language rather than just transcribe it phonetically. (MKM)

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Extract from notes for a talk on

THE TEACHING OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Plenary Session

Association of Canadian University Teachers of English

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- by -

R. J. Baker

University of Prince Edward Island
Charlottetown
P.E.I.

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If you look at a Chinese dictionary of French, you will see in each noun entry the familiar f. or m. indicating the gender of the noun, feminine or masculine. If you look at a Chinese dictionary of English, after each noun you will see a small square box with either a U or a C in it, indicating the grammatical class of the noun. Over the last twenty odd years, I have asked teachers of English in every province -- some thousands -- what the U and the C stand for. As a rule, no-one has been able to tell me. I usually explain that other letters could be chosen, S instead of U for example, or M and I in Russian books, but that the significant thing is not the letter used, but the fact that a major category of English nouns is being referred to. I can usually persuade some people to name some of the major features of the English noun. It can be singular or plural, nominative or genitive, regular in its plural or irregular; some will say feminine or masculine; others feminine, masculine, neuter or common; and still others that English nouns are all neuter. Many will say concrete or abstract; a few animate or inanimate. But I very rarely find what U and C mean. Yet every major grammar of English in this

century, while sometimes using different names and letters, recognizes the major feature of the English noun being discussed. Most textbooks for teaching English as a foreign language spend much time on the distinction, and for students who speak so-called exotic languages, that is, languages very different from ours, the distinction presents major problems. Depending on whether a noun is a C or a U, it can or cannot form a plural in certain circumstances. Without an article it can or cannot appear as the subject of a sentence. Either category can appear with a lot of, but one can appear only with many, the other with much. Some nouns can be either U or C, but meanings will be determined by the category. Sometimes the categories appear to reflect the classes of things that the words stand for -- members of the cereal family tend to be U's, members of the legume family tend to be C's. Occasionally, a word changes its class historically. The noun pea is a C, but not long ago it could occur only in its U form. Now it appears in its U form only in special contexts, in Canada only in a nursery rhyme, I think.[1]

[1]In the question period at the ACUTE meeting I was finally asked, as I was sure I would be, if I would please explain what C nouns and U nouns were. They are, of course, countable and uncountable nouns. As one distinguished professor said, "I feel like Monsieur Jourdain: I have been using C and U nouns all my life." The nursery rhyme is "Pease porridge hot...."

I cannot think of a European country where a question about a fundamental category of the noun in the native language would produce blank looks from educated speakers and particularly from teachers of the native language; and for twenty-five years I have wondered who teaches our students about the English language, who should, and should anyone?

I began my preparation for today by sending a questionnaire to every department of English of a university in the AUCC.[2] The questionnaire asked whether or not the typical freshman, graduate with a major in English, future teacher of English, graduate with a major in something other than English, graduate with an honours degree in English, M.A. and Ph.D. would know certain things about the English language. Could he or she analyse English with a "traditional school" grammar, a "structural" grammar, a "transformational-generative" grammar, Quirk's grammar, or any other. It asked questions about the ability of the student to record his own speech or someone else's in various phonetic and phonological systems. There was a question on various dictionaries, one on metrics, and a catch-all question: Could the student describe:

[2]Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada

- the characteristic features of Canadian English
- the variety of English grammars
- the history of English grammar
- the history of the English sound system
- the history of English vocabulary
- geographical variation in current English
- social variation in current English
- generational variation in current English

I received 45 answers, from every province but one, from both anglophone and francophone institutions, from large and small, undergraduate and graduate. I am convinced that the responses give a fair picture of what is happening..., even though most of the picture is blank.

Briefly, the typical freshman, English major, English honours graduate, M.A. or Ph.D. will know nothing of any English grammar developed in this century, nothing of any phonetic or phonological system of English. Some will know something of dictionaries. A number of majors and honours and graduate students will know something of Canadian English, variation in English, and the history of English. Since, however, the institutions that claimed that their majors, honours, and graduate

students knew those subjects also maintained, as a rule, that they knew nothing of grammar or phonology, the answers baffled me. How can anyone know anything significant about Canadian English or variations in English with no phonology or grammar? How can one know anything -- except about vocabulary -- of the history of English without grammar or phonology?

There were a few exceptions. Francophone and bilingual universities reported much more knowledge than anglophone institutions. One university reported that its English students knew everything I asked about, a reply that surprised as much as it delighted me, because when I was there only three years ago, its students were as happily ignorant as anyone else's. But the respondent finished with: "The answers are hopeful rather than practical."

I found the comments illuminating. Approximately 30% of the respondents asked that their institution not be identified. Many comments were clearly defensive, a few aggressive, one offensive. I should here thank the chairman who provided a rare moment of humour -- intentional, I hope -- by asking, "What is a Quirk?"

Many chairmen or their representatives professed ignorance. A couple argued that they did not know the meaning of typical. A number complained about the grammatical ignorance of their freshmen but also said that they did not know -- and presumably could not find out -- what future teachers of English from their university knew about English.

The answers did not surprise me. After all, our own society, the Association of University Teachers of English, publishes a journal[3] of "scholarship and criticism concerned with all literature /my italics/ written in the English language." It has to date, I think, in twenty issues published one article -- on literature -- that involves a study of the analysis of the English language (in the sense in which I am using that phrase). And that was included as an "editor's choice", in other words, an article that the normal refereeing system did not allow. Our Report by Priestley and Kerpnick says virtually nothing about the study of the language as opposed to its use. In its description of the course

[3] English Studies in Canada

offerings of fourteen representative universities, we find 487 courses listed: 20 are in language, the history of English, or linguistics, about 1 course in language to 24 in literature or composition. Some large departments listed no courses in language. The total enrolment in language for the fourteen departments was 556; five courses in literature had larger enrolments, as did one in composition and one in literature and composition.

I hasten to assure you that I am not comparing the present age with some golden age -- as Professor Jordan accused Priestley and Kerpnick in our journal. When I was an undergraduate at UBC,[4] I am sure that there was not one course in contemporary English in anglophone Canada. At my first Learned's meeting, I had the temerity to challenge Professor Woodhouse's lament for the decline of language studies. Language studies, in fact, had been flourishing ever since Sapir and Bloomfield. With great compassion Woodhouse gave me lunch, listened, and offered me a job!

[4]University of British Columbia

At this point, on this subject, twenty years ago I would have begun ritual lamentations, ash strewing, prophetic claims of virtue lost and doom imminent. I would have cited the NCTE's advice on what English teachers should know about the language, shown you the textbooks on English currently used by students in teacher training colleges in Russia, (I have some if anyone would like to see them), contrasted what we do with what other countries do, asked rhetorically how anyone can talk about metrics or sound in verse without knowing anything about English phonology, how can anyone talk about style except in terms of language. I would have talked about the confusion forced on our children learning to read -- especially in grade one French immersion -- because of the confusion of sound, phoneme, letter, and the name of the letter. Even today, I might ask timidly, how can one understand structuralist criticism -- which claims to derive from Saussure and structural linguistics -- without knowing any linguistics. Unfortunately I find contemporary structural criticism very difficult, and I see only very slight connections with structural linguistics. I feel like the old

priest in The Lady's Not for Burning. He said of something he didn't understand, "It's Greek to me. But then I understand Greek." I understand structural linguistics but Culler is all Greek to me.

I am not going to say those things for two reasons. First, it is absolutely clear that the overwhelming majority of people teaching English at universities in Canada have had very little training in the study of the language, are not much interested in it, and see it as a very minor part of a department's work. Some departments, in fact, are quite happy to give up and leave any responsibility to departments of speech, linguistics, communications, anthropology, or education. If we look at the list of interests of our members, we find few who list language. Moreover, it looks to me as though there is a high proportion of members of education departments[5] or faculties.

Secondly, I have come to question what I once held as a given, that the study of the language and the study of literature and composition must go together. I still think that they should, but I am

[5] It is no accident that virtually the only textbook available for teaching much about Canadian English is the excellent Our Own Voice by Ruth McConnell, a long-time member of the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia.

less certain than I was. Because of the ways in which the word language is used, perhaps this is the time for me to say how I am using it. Very simply. For me the study of the English language is the description and analysis of its sounds, syntax, word formation, vocabulary, and history. It is language talking about language.

Let me talk first about the relationship of the study of language -- as I understand it, basically grammar and phonology -- to composition, first because I intend to spend very little time on it. The evidence is overwhelming -- from nearly a century of research in Britain, Canada, the USA, New Zealand, and more -- that there is no significant relationship between a knowledge of grammar and the ability to write. Since most of the studies were done with "traditional grammar", some people have hoped that the newer grammars might be more successful. I am not convinced that they are. Personally, then, I would not argue for language teaching, by an English department or some other, on the grounds that it helps students write.

My questioning of the relationship between a knowledge of language and literature is different.

Partly, it is because it is impossible to dispute that very many people are excellent scholars and critics without knowing a phone from a phoneme, broad IPA from narrow, a U noun from a C. Moreover, I think that I must admit that a large number or students of English have found the study of the language painful, dull, and apparently unrelated to literature. As a student, I found the hunting of the Germanic ablaut and umlaut left me considerably less sympathetic to grammarians than Browning or Robert Benchley. And although I liked the comment of one of my respondents that students at his university could be divided into the one or two a year who specialized in English language, and the vast majority, the lesser breeds without Grimm's Law, I can understand the attraction of being without the law. Finally, if the scholars of language in this century -- let us say, from Henry Sweet ("'Enry 'Iggins") on (his New English Grammar was published in 1892) -- are right, no poet, novelist or playwright until recently could have known much about English grammar. Even in recent years, it is only a relatively small number of Canadian poets -- Bowering, Kearns and

Davey, to name a few -- who have known anything about the language in the way I am talking about. Chaucer could have known no grammar of English, Shakespeare might have known the very first, but scholars agree that Bullokar's grammar does not describe English very well. We can hardly argue that a knowledge of grammar is essential for a poet.

Many poets have studied phonetics. But for every poet who has known something of language, there must have been a hundred pedants who knew the grammars of their time and wrote no poetry. Nevertheless, I cannot help believing that there is a close association between the analysis of language and literature. I was extremely fortunate as an undergraduate at UBC. A remember all of my lecturers in English with great affection and respect. I learned much from them all, but it was the two poets, Earle Birney and Roy Daniells -- who did not always agree -- who did most to convince me of the close relationship between literature and linguistics, just as, later, it was the poets among my students who were most interested.

I find, however, that most students are interested in some aspect of language. The great difficulty is to help them learn enough elementary phonology and grammar to talk sensibly and precisely about the particular variety of language they are interested in. The choices of method seem to be between what is often called a "rigorous" approach, in which the students work through a textbook on the phonetics of English and then through a grammar -- and a rather folksy approach -- after-dinner gossip about words and the history of language dealt with almost entirely through vocabulary. Romans carelessly leaving words behind; Angles and Saxons raiding and settling (rarely Jutes -- which as someone from Kent I object to); Norsemen bringing skirts instead of shirts, kirks instead of churches; Normans teaching us how to cook, hunt and practice law; and renaissance men with Latin, Greek and inkhorns. Everyone borrowing and never paying back. Polonius would be shocked.

My own experience with the "rigorous" method -- one much practiced when the only courses are taught in linguistics or anthropology departments -- is

unhappy. The typical freshman or even the typical undergraduate in English is rarely inspired that way. The history of the language with the emphasis on what Baugh called external may be more successful, but too often it is boring for the instructor and does not lead the students into the essential sound and structure.

With a mixed group of beginning students, particularly if it is a typical freshmen group with potential scientists, lawyers, etc., I believe very strongly that one must combine some elements of the rigorous approach with some of a very general approach. Ideally, I like a combination of lectures and seminars with about fifteen students. I begin by giving a brief quiz, insisting that it is for information, not for evaluation. In fact, I do not grade it. It is a very simple quiz and I have found it successful for years -- successful in that it convinces students that they simply do not agree on elementary facts about English. I give it in two parts. The first part has questions like these:

> If you think that English nouns have gender, what genders do they have?
>
> What is a noun? A verb?
>
> What is an auxiliary verb?
>
> What tenses do English verbs have?

I collect the answers and then distribute another sheet. It says:

> If you believed that English nouns have gender, what gender are the following nouns:
>
> | | |
> |---|---|
> | worm | rose |
> | hermaphrodite | virus |
> | microbe | mule |
> | table | amoeba |
> | gelding | baby |
>
> According to your definition, which of the following are auxiliary verbs?
>
> a) I have driven.
> b) I shall drive.
> c) I can drive.
> d) I want to drive.
> e) I ought to drive.
> f) I expect to drive.
> g) I am going to drive.
> h) I intend to drive.
> i) I am bound to drive.
> j) I am to drive.
> k) I am considering driving.
> l) I kept driving.
> m) I am driving.
> n) I was driving.
> o) I began driving.
> p) I started driving.
> q) I am about to drive.
> r) Let's drive.
> s) I am able to drive.
> t) I may drive.
> u) That car needs driving.
> v) I need to drive.
> w) I am going to be driven.
> x) I managed to drive.

The results were the same when I gave the quiz this year in PEI or last year in Nova Scotia, as they were when I was giving it in B.C., Alberta, Saskatchewan and other provinces years ago. And the results are the same regardless of the age or experience or specialisms of the subjects. English teachers tend to get into more heated arguments afterwards than freshmen, but nearly all reveal an almost complete absence of any kind of framework within which to discuss the fact that it is rare to

find even two people agreeing on the answers. I have found that it is essential to establish very early that they do not, in fact, agree on some traditional grammar which unpleasant -- probably semi-literate -- linguists are trying to destroy.

After a week discussing the results of the quiz, I try to show the bases of a variety of grammars of English -- usually a traditional grammar like Nesfield, and then Roberts, Sledd or Chomsky. I must emphasize that I mean the bases, not a detailed working through, although some practical analysis is necessary if students are to understand what is going on. The analysis of language is like mathematics. You have to do your sums to understand the principles.

From the beginning of the course I ask students to read, at the rate of about one every two weeks, some paperbacks on language intended for a lay or student audience. I change the books often, but I usually include Jespersen's Growth and Structure, Sapir's Language, Laird's Miracle of Language, and Potter's Our Language. I ask them to concentrate on the sections on word formation and vocabulary. I see no point in lecturing on vocabulary. The history of the English lexicon is well established. The examples are standard. There is also, I believe, a great deal to be said for

helping students learn to take notes on their own reading, etc. All very elementary, but eventually students seem to find it helpful.

Concurrent with the readings and the lectures, I organize the tutorials to get the students started on papers. The great problem is that they need the technical background of the grammar we are talking about, and the sound structures we will talk about later, if they are to tackle any topic in linguistic terms. I live with that. I suggest as wide a range of topics as I can. One of the delights of teaching language is that we live in a sea of it. New topics arrive every day.

I very much prefer topics that will focus attention on a particular chunk of language. Patchwork quilting of secondary sources is particularly unrewarding in language study. But the chunks can be anything from a middle English text, to a set of Bibles or dictionaries chosen from different periods; from a tape of a disc jockey, to a recording of a poet. The important thing is that the student look at, listen to, some language, and try to say something about it. Surprisingly, that is particularly difficult with phonetics. Many people simply learn to transcribe a

key word system. Since one always has a few students who seem unable to observe, who must deal with great abstractions, I have a few topics for the library-bound -- universal languages, Esperanto, theories of usage. I do everything I can, however, to encourage work based on detailed and close observation.

That means that many students bog down, get negative results. Their technical background in grammar and phonology is not great enough for them to describe what they want to describe. A surprising number of those take more language study. A majority of students concentrate on vocabulary and word formation. (Charlie Brown "I'm doing my you-have-to-go-to-school-and-I-don't dance.") Some always slide away from language in linguistic terms to sociology, politics, philosophy -- you name it. A few, usually the poets, tackle problems of poetics. Abercrombie's Theory of Versification and Christine Brooke-Rose's Grammar of Metaphor usually fascinate them.

If I may digress, I often wonder if the popularity of the haiku in our schools, and its very rare use by our poets, does not come from our teachers' ignorance of language. It is true that a poet can impose almost any formal limitation on his verse...for the sheer love of playing with language and working against -- or

perhaps I should say with -- a very difficult grain. (Dylan Thomas wrote a poem of 156 lines in which the first rhymed with the last, the second with the penultimate, and so on until he came to a couplet in the middle.) But is the haiku a sensible form for English speakers? We know that all languages base their verse on one of two possible systems -- chest pulses or breath pulses, giving rise to syllable-timed or stress-timed verse. Japanese, like French, is based on syllable-timing. English is based on stress-timing. Would the haiku be the chosen form if our teachers had the most elementary knowledge of the structure of English verse?

By now it is obvious, as you no doubt expected, that I believe that universities should teach -- everyone in my view -- something about our native language. I believe that if anyone cannot learn to teach language at the elementary level I have been talking about, his or her value as a teacher of literature must be questioned. The love of language in all its variety must surely be at the basis of our special love of the special use of language in literature. I am not suggesting that we all become phoneticians. The hours, weeks, even years of drill and practice necessary are not worth it. Judging

from the way some of our students read verse, elocution lessons might be more useful if we are to study sound. But I do think that we should be able to talk about significant sounds in a reasonably accurate way. (Anthony Burgess, by the say, complained that he couldn't use the most elementary ways of describing speech because he wouldn't be understood. He was criticized for describing the rhotacism or a character's speech, and he said that it was the most accurate way of describing it.) Anyone can learn a reasonable transcription of his own speech in quite a short time.

As teachers, we should have a fairly thorough knowledge of a modern grammar, and I would suggest Quirk's.[6] First, it is useful as a tool for discussing style, for editing student essays, for showing nuances of meaning. (I will not comment here on its use in second-language teaching, the study of child language, etc. I am taking it for granted that the majority of members of English departments are interested mainly in

[6] Quirk, Randloph, et al. A University Grammar of English, Longman, 1973, and the full version A Grammar of Contemporary English. It was interesting to note that a very large number of the professors of English present at the ACUTE conference had not heard of the major reference grammar of English published in the last quarter of the century. The publisher did not have the book on display while the English professors were meeting. He told me that he had brought it for the meetings of the linguists and the anthropologists: "I didn't put it out for the English meeting. None of them are interested in language at all!"

teaching literature.) I think however, that there is a second reason for knowing grammar and teaching it. At present we live with an intellectually sloppy mess of faintly-remembered fragments of grammars which have not been taken seriously for nearly a century. Except among specialists, I have never been able to get five teachers of English -- at any level -- to agree on the most elementary concepts of English grammar, C nouns or U nouns, or gender, for example. Worse is that they have no technical or theoretical knowledge with which to discuss their differences. Frequently, their differences boil down to the foreign language they studied. If it was German, they find modal auxiliaries in English which are simply translations of the German modals. If Latin, they have a four or five case system for the English noun, plus three genders based on sex. If French, they have subjunctives in *may*; if Russian, aspects. One can only groan when one hears, "I learned all my English grammar when I took Latin," or French, or German. The students who find it most difficult to learn about English are those who had a "good" Latin teacher who was convinced that the structure of Latin and the structure of English are the same.

As long as such misunderstandings of the structure of our own language exist, it seems to me that we should

take some time to teach all our students something about grammar. If we found that in a fourth year honours class in English, some students thought that Shakespeare wrote in German, some in Latin....but that is not a parallel. I cannot think of something in literature that parallels the situation in grammar.

If any one of us could teach the elementary analysis of English, we could afford to let the linguists -- in whatever department -- teach the more advanced work. As it is, we are in danger of perpetuating the ignorance -- worse, the fallacies -- of our students.

Indeed, my answer to Should anyone? is that in English departments, everyone should be taught about the English language -- at the elementary level I am talking about. It's true that most people would have to spend a summer, perhaps, preparing the material, but that is a very small amount of time compared with that spent by specialists in language preparing for the literature courses they teach!